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**Chicana Poetics: Genre and Style in Gloria Anzaldúa and Lorna Dee  
Cervantes**

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**Dissertation Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy to the  
National University of Ireland, University College Cork**

**Under the Supervision of**

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**January 2015**

## **Abstract**

This thesis conducts a formal study of the poetry of Gloria Anzaldúa and Lorna Dee Cervantes, placing their work in dialogue with genre and style. These two Chicana poets are exemplary of politicised experimentation with poetics, underpinned by a keen awareness of the rich history of form, genre and style. In the work of each poet, two poetic modes are examined: one traditional, and one experimental. Anzaldúa's uses of the dramatic monologue as a border genre, and her construction of [auto]poetics, stemming from her multi-genre, autobiographical approach to writing, are considered. Cervantes's complex approach to the construction of docupoetics that achieves a depth of field in terms of merging a multidimensional approach to aesthetics with highly politicised transnational content, as well as her engagement with the longstanding poetic of elegy via various formal points of entry, is investigated. These poetic modes are primarily explored via close readings, supported by a multidisciplinary framework that includes Anzaldúa's feminist theories of identity and writing, abjection theory, postcolonialism, and transnationalism. Overall, these four key areas demonstrate the ways in which aesthetics is a crucial consideration in the exploration of the broader issues of content and context in Chicana poetry.

## Table of Contents

Declaration.....	iii
Acknowledgements .....	iv
Introduction.....	1
Chapter One - Ventriloquising the Borderlands: Dramatic Monologue in the Poetry of Gloria Anzaldúa .....	23
Chapter Two - Narrating the Self: Gloria Anzaldúa's [Auto]Poetics.....	75
Chapter Three - Poetic Jump Cuts, Infomercials, and Intertexts: Lorna Dee Cervantes's Docupoetry.....	125
Chapter Four - "And I Thought Nothing of Death": The Elegiac Poetry of Lorna Dee Cervantes .....	190
Conclusion .....	261
Appendix 1: Translation of Gloria Anzaldúa's " <i>Sobre Piedras Con Lagartijos</i> "	266
Appendix 2: Translation of Gloria Anzaldúa's " <i>En El Nombre de Todas las Madres Que Han Perdido Sus Hijos en la Guerra</i> " .....	269
Works Cited .....	275

## Declaration

I, Donna Maria Alexander, hereby declare that this thesis has been written by me, that it is the record of work carried out by me, that all sources are acknowledged, and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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## Introduction

This thesis focuses on the works of two contemporary Chicana poets, Gloria Anzaldúa and Lorna Dee Cervantes, in a bid to examine the significance of genre and style in their poetry. I argue, through close readings of selected poems, that these poets offer case studies that indicate the depth and breadth to which hybridity can be represented in literatures marked by colonial, postcolonial and neo-colonial experiences. Poetry, for Anzaldúa and Cervantes, is a medium for gauging the effects of postcolonialism and capitalist neo-imperialism on minority groups, and a means of exploring possibilities for the representation of what Anzaldúa calls the “*mestiza* consciousness,” defined as “a hybrid progeny, a mutable, more malleable species with a rich gene pool” born out of “racial, ideological, cultural and biological cross-pollinization” (*Borderlands* 99). This thesis is concerned with how that Chicana-specific hybridity translates onto the poetic page. Poetry, like the *mestiza* consciousness itself, is a rich biome communicable via an array of genres, styles and techniques that blend, clash, and reshape one another through cycles of exchange and absorption. By means of its engagement with a number of key genres and styles, dramatic monologue, [auto]poetics, docupoetry, and elegy, this thesis also charts the ways in which the poetry of Anzaldúa and Cervantes is a roadmap that marks the



convergence of critical highways in the study of Chicana/o and postcolonial poetry: the aesthetic and the thematic.

This study examines poems that are taken from key texts by Anzaldúa and Cervantes. In the first chapter, three poems are chosen from Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*: "We Call Them Greasers," "Sobre Piedras Con Lagartijos [On Rocks with Little Lizards]," and "En El Nombre de Todas las Madres que han Perdido sus Hijos en la Guerra [In the Name of All the Mothers who have Lost Their Children in the War]." In the second chapter a poem from *Borderlands*, "Cervicide," and one published posthumously in *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*, "La Vulva es una Herida Abierta [The Vulva is an Open Wound]," form the central points of analysis.

Cervantes has published five major collections to date, and poems from the first, *Emplumada*, and the third, *Drive: The First Quartet* comprise the analyses in two chapters on her uses of genre and style. Chapter Three examines two poems from *Drive*: "Coffee" and "Bananas." These poems represent the pinnacle of Cervantes's docupoetic experiment. Chapter Four examines a selection of poems from *Emplumada*, "For Edward Long," "Meeting Mescalito at Oak Hill Cemetery," and "Uncle's First Rabbit." This chapter also focuses on "Letters to David: An Elegiac Mass in the Form of a Train" from *Drive*. In a bid to represent the array of elegiac routes Cervantes takes in her poetry, a spread of early and a more recent poem offers scope for discussion.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “poetics” as “The aspect of literary criticism that deals with poetry; the branch of knowledge that deals with the techniques of poetry” or “The creative principles informing any literary, social or cultural construction, or the theoretical study of these; a theory of form” (“Poetics, n.” n.pag). The latter definition comes closest to the interpretation of “poetics” in this thesis. The creative process that results in poetry is stamped with the hallmarks of a culture, a time and a socio-political context. To divorce aesthetics from content, and internal processes of a poem from its external influences, is therefore to reduce the meaning of “poetics” to a fragment of its significance.

However, there have been times when such an approach trended in literary criticism. In the mid-twentieth century, New Criticism dominated as an approach that focused on close readings of poetry, making criticism a science that divorced aesthetics from any exterior meaning and voided poetics of external factors, including the historical, sociocultural and socio-political. Of New Criticism, Northrop Frye states that “we [literary critics]. . . .had to complete our argument by removing all external goals from literature, thus postulating a self-contained literary universe. Perhaps in doing so we merely restored the aesthetic view on a giant scale” (350). This resulted in a critical view of

a poem as literally a poem. It studies the symbolism of a poem as an ambiguous structure of interlocking motifs; it sees the poetic pattern of meaning as a self-contained “texture,” and it thinks of the external relations of a poem as being with the other arts, to

be approached only with the Horatian warning of *favete linguis*.

(Frye 82)

This approach to literary criticism comports with the OED's first definition of "poetics." Part of the project of the New Criticism is that certain poems were privileged for close reading, and most poetry deemed postcolonial postdates the hegemony of the New Criticism. Postcolonialism renders the New Critical methodology inappropriate, if not wholly redundant. According to Rafael Pérez-Torres, "Although Chicano literary criticism has not as yet been widely discussed as a postcolonial discourse, similar tensions and discontinuities are at work in both forms of discourse" (27-28). Indeed, Dominique Combe notes a "blind spot" in studies of postcolonial texts that loses sight of form and genre in lieu of sociocultural, socio-political and historical contexts from which the texts in question originate. In the case of Chicana/o literature, poetry represents such a blind spot. In Combe's view, "the ideological meaning of a text, according to its socio-historical situation, prevails over any aesthetic assessment" in postcolonial critiques that privilege context over aesthetics (viii). Likewise Chicana/o literature is so grounded in socio-historical, socio-cultural and socio-political contexts that it is imperative to address these issues. Pérez-Torres notes this connection between postcolonialism and Chicana/o literature stating that

Without negating the reality of these histories, postcolonials engage with their disempowered pasts, and reinvoke strategies of resistance, survival, and empowerment in that past. Their identities incorporate the other, become the other, transform the other. Chicano culture as one that occupies the borderlands

between and within Mexico and the United States manifests such an identity. (29)

Thus, Chicana/o subjects share with postcolonial subjects a need to negotiate the past, and to develop strategies of resistance and survival. To this end, in Chicana/o culture, like the majority of postcolonial cultures, literature has been a key method. These issues of resistance to and survival of oppression, and the work towards empowerment are key informers of the themes of Chicana/o literature. This thesis aims to demonstrate that considerations of genre and style in Chicana poetry open up texts in ways that illuminate the external factors that influence them.

As New Criticism was taking its leave, Chicana/o literature made its entrance amid the Chicano Movement of the 1960s. Hand in hand with radical political changes brought about by protests and marches and political manoeuvres by Chicana/o activists was a surge in publications by Chicana/o writers in the decades that followed. The initial wave of publications was male-dominated, with Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales’s “I am Joaquín,” Americo Paredes’s *Floriscanto en Aztlán*, and Rodolfo Anaya’s *Bless Me Ultima* being among the most prominent. Culturally rich and poetically diverse, the demise of New Criticism came just in time for Chicana/o-authored texts that defied pigeon-holing by right of their socio-cultural, historical and political rootedness and their poetic diversity. Not only did this moment see the inception of a new body of literature, but also a new challenge for literary critics, particularly those interested in postcolonial literature. It is widely acknowledged that postcolonial theory has privileged the former colonies of

France and England, and that the former colonies of Spain in the New World and elsewhere have always occupied a more ambivalent space within these discussions. The coloniser-colonised paradigm has generally dominated the frames of postcolonial theory: frames that are complicated in the context of any discussion of Chicano poetry, given the particular historical circumstances that prevail. With Chicana/o literature, a new paradigm was introduced: the coloniser-double colonised, given that the Chicana/o diaspora is the result of 500 years of colonial history: colonisation by the Spanish, and then by North America.<sup>1</sup> As one critic puts it:

one could argue that Chicano culture bridges three worlds, taking into account the mestizaje of Mexican culture, comprised of the (colonizing) Spanish and (colonized) indigenous identities. One might expand this to four worlds by acknowledging the Spanish colonial age, the historical bridge to European culture and a residual living presence in the language and lifestyle of various regions of the contemporary American Southwest. Five worlds, if one recognizes the North American indigenous cultures that, along with pre-Cortesian cultures, form something of a touchstone for the Chicano imagination. (Pérez-Torres 29)

In the mid-late twentieth century, and presently, the result of hundreds of years of colonialism is that Chicanas/os in North America live in a state that has been partitioned since 1848: a barrier that symbolises, then and now, the

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on the history of colonialism in relation to Chicanas/os see Rodolfo F. Acuña's *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos*, and Elizabeth "Betita" Martínez's *500 Years of Chicana Women's History/500 Años de la Mujer Chicana*.

continued dominance of white patriarchy. As Ellie D. Hernández states, “Unlike other postcolonial nations, its proximity binds U.S. Chicanas/os to Mexico in history, in economic relations, and in the social symbolic process” (17).

This marks a key difference between the postcolonial state of Chicana/os and citizens of other postcolonial nations: Chicanas/os are in the position of dwelling alongside their former colonisers, within the U.S. Their citizenship is marked, decided, and defined by a myriad of laws and policies that began with the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo in 1848. In 1987, Anzaldúa, in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, introduced a lens of cultural, textual and linguistic multiplicity through which we could explore key issues of Chicana/o literature in terms of identity. She articulates the *mestiza* consciousness using a blend of theory, personal essay, and poetry. Within these, Anzaldúa invokes pre-colonial tropes, including Aztec language, religion, culture and mythology, while, at the same time, unpacking the complexity of the postcolonial and neo-imperialist condition of Chicana/os in the U.S. through prose, theory and poetry.

Chicana/o poetry has provoked studies from a variety of different methodologies, some of which are discussed later in this introduction, including postcolonialism, transnationalism, postnationalism, third world feminism, and formal studies. No comparative studies of Anzaldúa and Cervantes’s poetry exist to date. Individually, however, both have received a certain amount of critical attention. Since her death in 2004, Anzaldúa has

been the subject of several studies, particularly her essays in *Borderlands*, and writings published posthumously in *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader* (2009).

However, her poetry remains on the margins of criticism, with scholarship focusing for the most part on her theoretical writings. Anzaldúa herself was a major proponent of prose and theory by women of colour. In her lifetime she edited three major collections of such writings. The first, edited with Cherrie Moraga, titled *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981) comprises theoretical and personal essays, poems and letters. These formed a ground-breaking collection, displaying innovative theories and ideas that drew attention to the fact that U.S. feminism is not a singularly white phenomenon. As Chela Sandoval states, it “made the presence of US Third World Feminism impossible to ignore on the same terms as it had been in the 1970s” (79). *Making Face, Making Soul: Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color* (1990), like the preceding collection, combined creative and critical approaches to demonstrate the kind of multicultural, socio-politically engaged feminism that Anzaldúa proposed. Co-edited with AnaLouise Keating, *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation* (2002) marks a critical shift in Anzaldúa’s feminist standpoint, from a transgressive woman of colour consciousness to a new, radically inclusionary feminism. That each, like *Borderlands*, is a multi-genre collection, valuing the creative/aesthetic alongside the critical/theoretical, indicates Anzaldúa’s diverse vision of poetics. Of Anzaldúa’s work, Jorge Capetillo-Ponce states that “her method is more akin to ‘style’ in art than it is to

‘analysis’ in the social sciences” (166). In other words, the strands of theory and social commentary in Anzaldúa’s writing are cast and moulded with an artist’s hand.

There are several book-length studies about Anzaldúa’s writing.<sup>2</sup> Some of the key texts to emerge since her death include AnaLouise Keating’s *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader* (2010) which collects a range of Anzaldúa’s published and unpublished essays, poems, drawings and interviews, in keeping with the writer’s own transgeneric approach to collecting works by women of colour. In terms of critical work, Keating’s book-length study, *Women Reading, Women Writing: Self-Invention in Paula Gunn Allen, Gloria Anzaldúa and Audre Lorde* places Anzaldúa’s work in dialogue with Native American and African American, feminist, lesbian, activist writers. Taking the metaphor of “threshold identities,” Keating illustrates “the potentially transformational implications of their work” (2). Using a range of theoretical frameworks as

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<sup>2</sup> As well as book-length studies, Anzaldúa’s work has received critical attention in many journal articles and book chapters. These include, but are not limited to, Anne Donadey’s “Overlapping and Interlocking Frames for Humanities Literary Studies: Assia Djebar, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Gloria Anzaldúa,” which addresses the need for comparative approaches to postcolonialism, feminist, ethnic, and francophone studies, using the work of Djebar, Dangarembga and Anzaldúa. George Hartley’s “‘Matriz Sin Tumba’: The Trash Goddess and the Healing Matrix of Gloria Anzaldúa’s Reclaimed Womb” examines Anzaldúa’s poem, “Matriz Sin Tumba” through her use of mythology, including her theory of the Coatlicue State. Jane Hedley’s “Nepantlist Poetics: Narrative and Cultural Identity in the Mixed-Language Writings of Irena Klepfisz and Gloria Anzaldúa” compares Anzaldúa’s writing with that of Jewish, lesbian author, Klepfisz, with a particular focus on narrative style, language and history. Maria Herrera-Sobek’s “Gloria Anzaldúa: Place, Race, Language, and Sexuality in the Magic Valley” examines how Anzaldúa inscribes the geography of the Rio Grande Valley with sexuality, language and history. Norma Alarcón’s “Anzaldúa’s *Frontera*: Inscribing Gynetics” examines how Anzaldúa uses her trope of the Shadow Beast, and invocations of Aztec mythology as part of her self-inscription in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. Anthony Lioi’s “The Best-Loved Bones: Spirit and History in Anzaldúa’s ‘Entering into the Serpent’” examines Catholic and Aztec religious imagery in Anzaldúa’s work.



diverse as French theory, black-feminist theory, and contemporary legal theory, Keating interrogates the identity politics at play in their writings.

In 2005, Keating edited a collection titled *Entre Mundos / Among Worlds: New Perspectives on Gloria Anzaldúa*. Published shortly after Anzaldúa's death in 2004, the collection aims to "outline Anzaldúa's theoretical and methodological contributions to Mestiz@ Studies, to Chican@, Latin@ and Xican Studies, to feminist and LGBTQ Studies, to emancipatory and peace studies, indeed, to critical and cultural theory across disciplines" (xiv).<sup>3</sup> A hugely ambitious collection, its mission statement is to advance "Gloria Anzaldúa's legacy" (xvi). In doing so, it showcases Anzaldúa's theoretical work, leaving poetry on the outskirts of her legacy.

More recently, the collection *Bridging: How Gloria Anzaldúa's Life and Work Transformed Our Own*, edited by AnaLouise Keating and Gloria González-López, pays tribute to the writer through a series of personal and critical essays that celebrate Anzaldúa's theoretical legacy. The focus on Anzaldúa's theoretical writing has opened up her work to new audiences and has reinforced the importance of her work. Yet, this leaves a critical "blind spot" – to use Combe's term once again – over her poetry. Anzaldúa's poetic contribution does not consist solely of the complex, imagistic poetics that illuminate her theoretical writings, but in equal measure the many poems she published in the second half of *Borderlands*, and those published

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<sup>3</sup> "At" symbols and spellings are original to the source text.

posthumously in *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*. A writer of fearless experimental energy, her poetry is characterised by strong, deliberate generic and stylistic choices, including dramatic monologue and [auto]poetics. These choices are bolstered by her theoretically-charged *mestiza* voice.

Lorna Dee Cervantes is the author of five major collections of poetry: *Emplumada* (1981); *From the Cables of Genocide: Poems on Love and Hunger* (1991); *Drive: The First Quartet* (2006); *Ciento: 100 100-Word Love Poems* (2010); and *Sueño* (2013). Her poetry immediately engaged critics, and her work has been the subject of a study, *Stunned into Being: Essays on the Poetry of Lorna Dee Cervantes* (2012), edited by Eliza Rodríguez y Gibson.<sup>4</sup> These essays communicate the politicised realm of Cervantes's *oeuvre*. The collection comprises a diverse range of methodologies, including third world feminist theory, trauma theory, media poetics, and poetry studies. My thesis enters into dialogue with these essays' contextual discussions of Cervantes and expands the remit of Rodríguez y Gibson's book in its focus on genre and style. In so doing, the thesis is informed by and alert to the cultural and socio-political

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<sup>4</sup> As well as being included in many book-length studies of Chicana poetry, Cervantes's poetry has been the subject of numerous articles and book chapters. To give a few examples, Timothy Libretti, in "Rethinking Class from a Chicana Perspective: Identity and Otherness in Chicana Literature and Theory" uses Cervantes's poetry as a key example of the ways in which Chicana poetry engages with issues of class. Sonia V. González's "Poetry Saved My Life: An Interview with Lorna Dee Cervantes" offers candid and broad insights into the poet's influences, the key themes and aims of her poetry and her thoughts on the future of Chicana/o poetry. Eliza Rodríguez y Gibson delivers two key articles on the mediation of loss and hunger in Cervantes's poetry in "'Tat Your Black Holes Into Paradise': Lorna Dee Cervantes and a Poetics of Loss," and "Love, Hunger and Grace: Loss and Belonging in the Poetry of Lorna Dee Cervantes and Joy Harjo." Edith Vasquez examines the poet's approaches to issues of social change, women's empowerment, the documenting and memorialisation of genocide in "Poetry as Survival of and Resistance to Genocide in Lorna Dee Cervantes's *Drive: The First Quartet*."

contextualisation of Cervantes's work copperfastened in Rodríguez y Gibson's collection.

Several years before this, in 2000, Cervantes's poetry had been analysed in Debra L. Madsen's *Understanding Contemporary Chicana Literature* alongside that of other Chicana writers of note, including Bernice Zamora, Ana Castillo, Alma Luz Villanueva, Denise Chávez, and Sandra Cisneros. This book was produced as part of a University of South Carolina Press series aimed at readers with little or no knowledge of the book's subject areas. Thus, Madsen's collection is in many ways introductory, a scoping study of key Chicana writers within the prominent contexts of Chicana literature: identity politics, cultural hybridity and its expression, female sexuality, and feminine archetypes inherited by Chicanas, including La Malinche, La Llorona, and La Virgen de Guadalupe.

The first introductory text to focus on an all-Chicana line-up of poets was Marta Ester Sánchez's 1985 study, *Contemporary Chicana Poetry: A Critical Approach to an Emerging Literature*.<sup>5</sup> This monograph engages with poetry by Cervantes, Alma Luz Villanueva, Lucha Corpi and Bernice Zamora in order to examine "the conflicts between gender and culture in contemporary Chicana poetry" (Sánchez 23). Sánchez focuses on the ways in which Chicana identity is

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<sup>5</sup> Before this study on Chicana poetry, Bruce Novoa published *Chicana Poetry: A Response to Chaos* in 1982. This was the first book-length study of Chicana/o poetry. Novoa focussed on Alurista, Gary Soto, Bernice Zamora, and José Montoya. The monograph comprises close textual analyses of major works and argues that Chicano poetry is a response to the threat of loss. As is noted in Chapter Four of this thesis, Novoa also proposes in this study that elegy is a key genre in Chicana/o poetry, albeit argued via male-authored texts.

expressed through “narrative, discursive modes and lyrical, imagistic modes” (9). Explicit about her use of the word “mode,” Sánchez clarifies at the outset that she is referring to “the different strategies of *address* used by these Chicana poets to communicate with their audiences” (9). I emphasise “address” here to indicate that strategy is attached to communication techniques, rather than to genre or form. With just one collection by Cervantes published at this stage, Sánchez gives close readings of several poems from *Emplumada* to discuss the poet’s strategies in terms of voice, language and vocalisation of Chicana identity to particular audiences.

One year later, Cordelia Candelaria’s *Chicano Poetry: A Critical Introduction* added to Sánchez’s efforts to bring critical attention to Chicana/o poetry. Candelaria’s monograph investigates the “‘authenticity,’ of the clearly definable ‘Chicano’ character of a text” (Pérez-Torres 174). Candelaria isolates three key aspects of Chicana/o poetry, stating that it is “multilingual,” “symbolic in an identifiably Chicano way,” and “it is grounded in ritual” (77). The critic charts three phases of Chicana/o poetry: “Movement Poetry,” “Toward a Chicana/o Poetics,” and “*Flor y Canto*.” Candelaria situates Cervantes’s poetry in the latter, a subgenre of Chicana/o poetry meaning “Flower and Song,” in other words, beauty and sound, or aesthetics and content. This third phase in Chicana/o poetry is characterised by “a sophistication of style and technique, an individuality in treatment of subject and theme, and a mature skill and control that signal an inevitably developed form” (Candelaria 137). At this point in the emerging criticism on Chicana/o

poetry, Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* was yet to be published, while Cervantes had just one collection in print.

In 1995 Tey Diana Rebolledo published *Women Singing in the Snow: A Cultural Analysis of Chicana Literature*, a book-length study of the Chicana literary tradition from 1848 to the late twentieth century. Rebolledo explores and contextualises a number of themes in Chicana literature, including the importance of identity, gender, sexuality, and of being Chicana, the significance of witnessing the social, cultural and historical contexts that framed the upbringing of the writers studied, and the meaning of living a border existence. Rebolledo states that the central issue in her study is her “attempt to show how Chicana writers, with the self-realization of their emerging consciousness, have managed to make themselves the subjects of their own discourses” (*Women x*).

In the same year as Rebolledo's monograph, Pérez-Torres published *Movements in Chicano Poetry: Against Myths, Against Margins*. This book examines “the migratory sensibility” of Chicana/o literature as it moves across and between “cultural sites” in terms of location, genre and context (3). Postcolonialism and postmodernism form the theoretical frameworks for Pérez-Torres's study, in which he explores a broad range of Chicana/o poetry. The central questions are:

How do the critical issues raised in the early phase of Chicano poetry manifest themselves today? How do contemporary poets write themselves and their work against their immediate past? How do they write themselves against the disempowering and

victimizing positions offered by hegemonic cultural constructions of Chicano identity? How does the poetry write itself against the grain of history? (7)

As Pérez-Torres answers these questions, he charts a move towards hybridity and *mestizaje* in contemporary Chicana/o poetry.

The critic is explicit about what his book does not do:

The present study is not a survey of Chicano poetry or a critical introduction to the literature. It intentionally does not provide an overview of the vast field of Chicano literary production; several books on the market function as excellent introductions for those as yet unfamiliar with this literary terrain. Although it does schematize and sketch several powerful trajectories in Chicano literary discourse - colonialism, nativism, politics, myth, history, language - this book does not attempt to document the various traditions from which contemporary Chicano literature emerges. Nor does it trace the different historical phases of the poetry and their characteristics. (4-5)

Like Pérez-Torres's book, this thesis is not intended as a critical introduction to Chicana poetry, nor is it a cultural analysis. The studies listed here have already formed a critical gateway to this vast area of study. This thesis engages with the genres, modes and styles of poetry used by Anzaldúa and Cervantes. In relation to the trajectories of colonialism, politics, history, feminism and transnationalism that critics like Pérez-Torres have identified in Chicana/o literature, this thesis undertakes a formal analysis of Anzaldúa's and Cervantes's poetry. A critical dialogue is opened up between the formal characteristics and the discourse of their poetry via close reading. Although this thesis is a study of two poets, it is not a comparative exercise: rather, the

poetry of Anzaldúa is read in dialogue with that of Cervantes. Anzaldúa's poetry has stood to one side up to now, as her theoretical and personal writings have taken central critical stage. Scholarly work on Cervantes has hardly been exhaustive either, and her uses of docupoetics and elegy have not been the subjects of formal study until now.

Anzaldúa and Cervantes are contemporaries. Their work has developed amid the same changing political, cultural and literary landscapes in the U.S. In their youth, both witnessed the African American Civil Rights Movement, the Chicano Civil Rights Movement, the United Farmworkers Movement, second wave feminism, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Vietnam War, and the assassinations of John F Kennedy, Martin Luther King and Malcom X. They also witnessed the rise in publications by Chicana/o writers, the works of the Beat Generation, the Black Arts Movement, the focus on selfhood and identity signalled by the advent of confessional poetry, and the exploration of ethnicity and taboo topics by writers like Toni Morrison and Alice Walker.<sup>6</sup> Both, galvanised by the need for increased visibility of Chicana literature, began publishing around the same time. While Cervantes is singularly a poet, Anzaldúa operates in a multi-genre mode. Anzaldúa's poetry is grounded in her work as a cultural theorist, and her poems often exhibit or illustrate her

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<sup>6</sup> Morrison's novels, including *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973), and *Beloved* (1987) examine issues of ethnicity, slavery, gender, incest, sexuality, and racism. Walker's *Meridian* (1976) and *The Color Purple* (1982), for example, deal with the Civil Rights Movement, racism, patriarchy, sexuality, domestic violence, abortion, and incest. Along with these themes come a variety of narrative and poetic techniques including monologue, epistolary, and *bildungsroman* approaches.

theories. She demonstrates a tendency to self-mythologise, exploring her personal history and developing theories using major milestones within her own life as case studies or diagrammatic elements of her poetic project.

Cervantes also draws on personal history, with second wave feminism reverberating through her poetry. However, in opposition to the self-mythology evident in Anzaldúa's poetry is a grassroots commitment to evoking societal and political change through the written word. "Grassroots" should not be used lightly here, and it is not intended to imply that Anzaldúa did not have political values at the heart of her work. The personal is political for both women. The difference is that where Anzaldúa turns to the U.S.-Mexico border as a muse of sorts for her work, Cervantes turns to the globe. From transborder to transnational, Anzaldúa's and Cervantes's poetry crosses and diverges at various contextual and aesthetic junctions: the representation of Chicana identity, the effects of postcolonialism and capitalist neo-imperialism, and the use of poetic genres and styles to articulate these issues.

I approached this thesis with what Rebolledo refers to as the "*salpicón* analysis of literature: a bit of this, a bit of that" (*Women* 5). Coming from a predominantly English studies background, I began reading Chicana literature in the final year of my undergraduate studies. My key focus was on American literature, in particular the representation of race. African American and white American literature were the mainstays of the modules I studied. Chicana literature was, for a time, a lone pursuit. Yet my knowledge of American literature informed my understanding of the literature of the Americas.



W.E.B. Du Bois's theory of the "double consciousness" of the African American opened up Anzaldúa's *mestiza* consciousness (6). My readings of French theorist, Hélène Cixous, and Bulgarian-French theorist, Julia Kristeva, prepared me for Anzaldúa's writing style. Rap-metal band Rage Against the Machine's Chicano frontman, Zach de la Rocha taught me through song lyrics about key issues like police brutality, capitalist neo-imperialism, and immigration that affect people of colour in the U.S. These, in turn, helped me to connect with the themes and issues evident of Cervantes's poetry.<sup>7</sup> Thus, my approach is a multifaceted one; indeed, this thesis crosses disciplinary borders as well as national ones. The central approach of close reading is informed by a number of conceptual approaches, including theories of abjection, postcolonialism, and capitalist neo-imperialism.

Genre studies and formal analysis are also central to this thesis. Jahan Ramazani defends the rigorous textual analysis of poetry, stating that when examining broader theoretical and contextual concerns, one must "zoom in on micro-level questions of form and language" and "aesthetic particulars without which the poetry of poetry would be lost" (*Transnational* xiii). Susan Stanford Friedman also offers a model of close reading in her work on women's poetry and poetics. In his 1977 article, "Of Social Politics and Poetry: A Chicano Perspective," Adolfo Ortega introduces a useful formula for classifying

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<sup>7</sup> This connection between Rage Against the Machine and Cervantes is a topic I explored in a conference paper delivered at "Transitions and Continuities in Contemporary Chicano Culture" in University College Cork in June 2011. This was then developed into an article published in the *Forum for Inter-American Research*, 5.1, 2012.

Chicana/o poetry in terms of narrative modes. Marta Sánchez (1985), Cordelia Candelaria (1986) and Tey Diana Rebolledo's (1995) book-length analyses explore the feminist impulses of Chicana poetic expression in terms of voice, audience, identity and cultural, historical and political contexts, using both textual and conceptual analysis. Moreover, Candelaria's analysis of the *Flor y Canto* poetry that blossomed in the 1980s pre-empts the flourishing Chicana poetics evident in the works of Anzaldúa and Cervantes examined here. A focus on genre and style requires going to the very roots of their formation in poetry. This thesis engages with Chicana/o, Latin American and Anglophone poetry in order to trace the generative ways in which Anzaldúa and Cervantes understand genre and style. Dramatic monologue, [auto]poetics, docupoetry and elegy are examined in this thesis in the context of their formal origins, and then in their contemporary iterations in the works of Anzaldúa and Cervantes.

The array of genres and forms examined in this thesis requires a range of conceptual strategies, as appropriate. Chapter One focuses on Anzaldúa's use of the dramatic monologue with reference to "We Call Them Greasers," "*Sobre Piedras con Lagartijos*," and "*En el Nombre de todas las Madres*." This chapter examines the ways in which the poet uses the key aspects of dramatic monologue – language and character – to construct the psychology of border characters. The voices of an Anglo male colonist, a male border crosser, and a grieving Chicana mother are used to ventriloquise the U.S.-Mexican borderlands. The dramatic monologue's origins in theatre and its mutations over time illuminate Anzaldúa's use of it as a border genre. Anzaldúa's

deployment of the dramatic monologue as a border genre is also opened up by her own personal and theoretical writings, by Anne McClintock's work on postcolonialism, and by Rosi Braidotti's study of nomadic subjects.

From poetic ventriloquism to [auto]poetics, the second chapter examines another aspect of Anzaldúa's construction of voice. Using her own theories of autohistoria and the Coyolxauhqui Imperative, as well as Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, this chapter interrogates Anzaldúa's engagement with narrative poetry as a vehicle for articulating her child-persona, Prieta/Prietita in "Cervicide" and "La Vulva es una Herida Abierta [The Vulva is an Open Wound]." In Chapter Two, the term [auto]poetics is used to define the ways in which Anzaldúa uses poetry as [auto]biography.<sup>8</sup> [Auto]poetics stems from the term *autopoiesis*, first defined by Chilean biologist, Humberto Maturana, "to describe the biological 'self-making' of living creatures" (Livingston 1). Ira Livingston's *autopoetics* graduates from this biological origin to describe the "self-making" evident in the "interzone" between "self-reference and performativity in literary and cultural theory, and, on the other, related notions of *autopoiesis* and self-organizing systems in biology and other sciences and social sciences" (1). Both definitions suggest subjectivity and junctions between things. These bolster this thesis's definition of a type of poetry in which the "auto" and "bio" impulse of memoir are interchangeable. Autohistoria, the Coyolxauhqui Imperative and abjection

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<sup>8</sup> I use square brackets around "auto" in both terms here to explicate the dual autobiographical and biographical approaches taken by Anzaldúa within a single text.

provide appropriate methodologies with which to explore the notions of fractures and bridgings in relation to the self that Anzaldúa's [auto]poetics infer. Anzaldúa's ideas about writing about the self and the anxieties of narrating personal history are cast in strong relief against abjection theory, in which issues that the self both rejects and cannot fully disconnect from provide a fertile theoretical environment for the study of Anzaldúa's struggle to construct self-history.

The second half of the thesis focuses on the poetry of Cervantes. The third chapter examines Cervantes's development of docupoetics using two poems as cases in point, "Coffee" and "Bananas." Cervantes's innovative approach to docupoetry finds its foundations in traditional genres and forms like lyric poetry, narrative poetry, *testimonio* and epistle, as well as in documentary techniques found in filmic and literary approaches. The result is a pair of highly complex poems, rhizomatic in terms of poetics and content.<sup>9</sup> Cervantes sheds further light on the literary and cultural influences that inform her docupoetry in interviews. The close readings of "Coffee" and "Bananas" are framed by Susan Stanford Friedman's theory of "long poems as big poems" in women's poetry, signalling that in tandem with the plethora of epic poems evident in masculine literary traditions, women produce poems that are "big" in terms of their depth of field.

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<sup>9</sup> The term *rhizomatic* is inspired by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's concept of the rhizome as a model for multiple entry and exit points in terms of representation and interpretation. For more on this, see their text, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*.

The final chapter investigates Cervantes's elegiac poetry. Like many contemporary poets, Cervantes takes multiple conceptual and formal approaches to the mode. The poems examined are "For Edward Long," "Meeting Mescalito at Oak Hill Cemetery," "Uncle's First Rabbit," and "Letters to David: An Elegiac Mass in the Form of a Train." Reinforced with an overview of the ever changing and developing range of this poetic mode, this chapter, informed by Novoa's view of elegy as a "paradigmatic model of Chicano literature," explores the ways in which Cervantes's elegiac poetry constitutes a postcolonial response to the issue of loss in Chicana/o culture and history (*Chicano* 7). If a crucial aspect of Chicana/o literature is an attempt to retrieve and regain lost ground culturally, historically, and politically, then the elegy, itself a poetics of loss and recovery, is an appropriate vehicle.

In this thesis, the Chicana poetics exemplified in the works of Anzaldúa and Cervantes, and in particular their engagement with traditional and experimental modes, genres and styles, demonstrate the ways in which hybridities are not just sociocultural demarcations, but are inscribed in the construction of poetry. The selected modes of dramatic monologue, [auto]poetics, docupoetry, and elegy illustrate how the aesthetic is twin skin to the thematic in the poetry of Anzaldúa and Cervantes. As Anzaldúa states: "*they lied, there is no separation between life and writing*" ("Speaking in Tongues" 31).



Alexander, D. M. 2015. *Chicana poetics: genre and style in Gloria Anzaldúa and Lorna Dee Cervantes*. PhD Thesis, University College Cork.

Please note that Chapters 1-4 and the Conclusion (pp.23-265) are unavailable due to a restriction requested by the author.

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## Appendix 1: Translation of Gloria Anzaldúa's "*Sobre Piedras Con Lagartijos*"

### On Rocks with Lizards<sup>64</sup>

(for all the wetbacks who have crossed to this side)

Pst!

that noise is Northbound, boys,  
stand up, here we separate.

I have to rest,  
Oh earth as hard as stone.  
Since I can remember  
it has been my bed,  
my life. Cursed was the day  
that I dared to cross over.  
I just want to make a few cents  
and return to my land.  
They say that some Americans are pure bastards  
Well, I can work like a donkey.  
The only thing I am missing is the bray  
because even I have teeth.  
One must fight  
How will my wife get through this?

I left her there with six little ones.  
I had to leave them

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<sup>64</sup> I am grateful to Alicia Gaspar de Alba, Tony Diaz, Nuala Finnegan and Niamh MacNamara for their advice on this translation.

leave that fucking piece of land  
No head of corn was rising  
it didn't even reach my knee.  
I am here for my children lying like an animal  
in the lap of Mother Earth.  
I wish the most Blessed Virgin would take me in her arms.

The wretched sun!  
and cactus in all directions  
No tree or anything, oh dear mother,  
the lizards and I - we have the same leather  
but I no longer have the speed.  
The pieces of wood I carried to the market  
Since childhood, the sacks of corn, so steep  
trying to get something green out of  
the wasteland that was my lot.

Life has ruined me  
I walk like an old man  
drifting from side to side.  
I can hardly see anymore.

The little girl will ask  
When will my papi come home?  
and the children shrieking  
their little hands pulling at her skirts  
mouths sucking on her dry nipples  
poor woman. At least I don't have to see  
that look in their eyes  
that wrenches my heart.



Who knows what happened to the others.  
When we heard the noise  
of the truck  
we ran in all directions.  
I became a ball and got  
beneath the cactus  
there I was stuck in a little cave  
that some little animal had made.  
I could not suffer the stings - bitches  
I still feel them grinding under my skin  
and suddenly I awoke  
I saw a snake watching over me  
So, there I was, in a ball  
in the belly of that cactus for two or three days  
thirst takes my memory  
my mouth dry from cursing, from fear.

They say that if I go to Ogaquinahua  
I will meet villagers there  
who will help me find work, get papers.  
Soon I will return to my land  
to get my wife and children.

Look how the lizards depart  
scattering pebbles all around  
Listen, what is that noise  
that snatches at my heart, that stops my breath and  
dries my mouth even more?  
Who owns those luxurious  
boots that walk  
toward my face?

## Appendix 2: Translation of Gloria Anzaldúa's "*En El Nombre de Todas las Madres Que Han Perdido Sus Hijos en la Guerra*"

**In the Name of all Mothers who have Lost Children in War<sup>65</sup>**

I cover his little head  
my child with cold little feet.  
Here I will keep him in my arms  
until I die.  
It seems like I have been sitting here for years  
in this puddle of blood.  
This happened this morning.

When I heard the shooting  
my blood stopped.  
With the child sleeping in my arms  
I ran out.  
Clods of earth rose,  
flying in all directions.  
Pieces from branches fell like rain,  
mossy rain  
I saw my neighbours fall wounded,  
the blood of chirispitiando in my arms,  
falling on his little face.

Soldiers chest down on the ground

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<sup>65</sup> I am grateful to Mary Carmen O'Mahony, Nuala Finnegan, and Elisa Serra Porteiro for their advice on this translation.

were firing their rifles  
and away from there I saw men with machine guns,  
firing at the people, at their huts.  
Around my feet the gunfire was tearing the earth.  
Behind my back I felt my hut catch fire,  
a searing heat threw me forward.  
Three shots to the chest, one after the other,  
I saw the holes in his little shirt.

I felt the child squeeze his little hand,  
the one that clutched my thumb.  
Blood sprang like water tossed from a bucket.  
It fell painting the stones  
and the nails of my feet.  
Who would have thought  
that a little boy could carry so much blood?  
Everyone smelled of blood.  
Mother God, who has committed this wrong?

With a swatch of my dress,  
I clean his little face  
peppered with blood.  
Oh, Mother God, a little eye dangling  
and the other not blinking.  
Oh, my sweet boy, I could not keep you from death.  
Grief rises in me like a fever.  
Who will heal my son?

I bathe his body.  
I put his intestines between his diaper.  
I apply cold water to his eyes.

I put his little left eye back in its socket,  
it comes out and slides down his cheek.  
I wipe the blood in his eyelids.  
I blow on his little head,  
I blow on his empty sockets.  
Nine times I blow.  
Heal, my son, heal.

What do I do Mother God?  
There's no relief for my sick little one.  
I'm not moving from here,  
I'll stay in this corner of land,  
here, my fate deserts me.  
Here I stay  
until my child is dust.  
Sitting here,  
looking at the thick callouses  
on the soles of my feet,  
here, looking at my rubber sandals  
swollen with his blood.  
Here, swatting the flies,  
watching the shadows curdled with blood.  
Here I stay until I rot.  
Through the night I lull him in my arms.  
I take the nipple,  
I bring it to his broken little mouth.  
He will never drink.  
The day dawns,  
I live to see another dawn,  
how strange.

I tend the child face down  
in my lap. I cover his face,  
cover his broken little bones.  
I gaze skywards.  
I look for his soul.  
Soul of my son, come here to my lap.  
Bloody little feather,  
return from the five destinations.  
My innocent little child  
who feared nothing,  
who never cried,  
even when death approached him.  
I want to know if he has lost his soul.  
Here in my skirts his little body,  
getting colder each hour.

I invoke you Mother God,  
woman in support of us.  
What did you want me to do my Mother?  
I am only a poor Indian.  
It was not my child's time,  
not yet no.  
These holes in his chest,  
this is not his destiny.  
I throw myself here on the earth  
I am only a whimper.  
I ask you to ease my son's pain,  
to return his soul.  
What fault has a child?  
Yes, Mother God,  
I tried to protect my children.

The eldest was killed in the plain.  
The second was killed on the hill.  
And last month my daughter was killed on the mountain.  
Áye, they ran out of fate.  
I had nothing left but the boy,  
who is covered with my skirt.  
Yes, this one with cold little feet.

Mother God, I want to kill  
each of the men waging war,  
who break, who end lives.  
This war has taken everything from me.  
What have they done to our land?  
Why do we make children?  
For what do we give them life?  
For them to be massacred?  
Why do the white boys  
mock the people?  
In their eyes we Indians  
are worse than animals.

Look how my son grows colder.  
Little son, why did they take your life  
before you learned to walk?  
This pestilence, the war,  
has taken everything from me.  
This scarlet disease turns  
everything into a worm.  
From remote locations  
comes this attack against the people.

I want to die Mother God,  
let more bullets come.  
Here, aim for my heart.  
The rest of me is already dead.  
Mother God, I beg you  
in the name of all mothers  
who have lost children in war.  
Mother God, I ask you to go  
after his soul,  
find it, shelter it.



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